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Baesler: ‘Essential Understandings’ Will Help Academics, Cultural Awareness

BISMARCK, N.D., Nov. 24, 2015 – School Superintendent Kirsten Baesler said a resource document about the history and cultural heritage of North Dakota’s American Indian tribes will be distributed to schools as part of her “Indian Education for All” initiative.

The document, called “North Dakota Native American Essential Understandings,” outlines the benefits of Baesler’s goal of broadening knowledge of North Dakota’s tribes among all of the state’s students. It is coupled with a series of video interviews of tribal elders, who describe the importance of passing on their knowledge of history and traditions to young people.

Lucy Fredericks, director of Indian and multicultural education in the state Department of Public Instruction, said the Essential Understandings document will be distributed to schools in December.

Statistics show that graduation rates of North Dakota’s American Indian students lag behind those of their non-Indian counterparts. Baesler said it is crucial to North Dakota’s future prosperity that all Native students graduate from high school ready for college, a career or the military.

“It is important for the vitality and future of North Dakota to make sure that all of our students do well in the classroom,” Baesler said. “Our state needs to have all of our students achieving at high levels, and currently we have a significant part of our state’s population where the academic achievement gap is not closing.”

All North Dakota students will benefit from learning about different cultural perspectives, Baesler said. The resource document is designed to foster cultural dialogues and encourage critical analysis of historical and contemporary issues, the superintendent said.

The Essential Understandings document includes information about the importance of Native American connections to their relatives and all living things; the uniqueness and common identity of tribes; the promotion of culture, language and tradition through storytelling, sharing and humor; and the status of tribes as independent, sovereign nations.

“One of our beliefs that we, as Native people, share is the knowledge that every living thing has a spirit. Sometimes described as ‘respect,’ it is much more than that. It is our belief,” Carol Davis, an elder in the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, writes in the document.

It was written with the help of tribal elders, officials and educators. Fredericks said it is considered a starting point in promoting greater awareness of Native American cultures and traditions in North Dakota’s schools.

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Fredericks said she expects the document will lead to “the active engagement of many more educators, administrators, tribal elders and communities in developing additional resources, lesson plans, curricula, video interviews and collaborative projects.”

Baesler has emphasized the need for greater cultural understanding in North Dakota’s schools during her time as superintendent of public instruction.

She has hosted North Dakota’s first summit meetings on Indian education, the most recent of which was held last July. Baesler first announced her “Indian Education for All” initiative last year; the Essential Understandings document is a key element of that program.

“It is my hope that efforts like the Essential Understandings initiative and the Indian education summits will help our North Dakota students be more successful,” Baesler said.

Link to tribal elder videos:

<http://bit.ly/1PPRRZ9>

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